

Addressing Silica Safety in the Engineered Stone Countertop Industry

Carlos has been working as a countertop fabricator since he came to California from El Salvador when he was 19. He cuts, grinds, and polishes stone slabs to make countertops, a process that "leaves dust everywhere." Now 30, he was recently diagnosed with silicosis, a disabling, incurable, and sometimes deadly lung disease. Carlos is one of hundreds of countertop fabrication workers worldwide who have been diagnosed with silicosis in recent decades.

The Challenge

Engineered stone (also known as quartz) countertops are an increasingly popular choice in kitchens and bathrooms but pose a risk to workers due to their high levels of silica. Without appropriate safety controls, countertop fabrication releases silica dust; workers who inhale this dust are at risk of silicosis. In California, cases have primarily occurred among young immigrant men, many with severe disease. Silicosis is preventable, but many employers do not follow existing safety regulations. Employers and workers need more resources and standards to implement safe work practices.

The Response

The California Department of Public Health (CDPH) Occupational Health Branch (OHB) has played an instrumental role in identifying and characterizing this growing epidemic of silicosis. As of November 2023, we have identified more than 90 cases of silicosis among countertop fabrication workers in California, including at least 10 deaths. We recently published a [paper in JAMA Internal Medicine describing 52 of these cases](#), which was accompanied by an editorial and podcast and received national media attention. We also released an [advisory through the California Health Alert Network \(CAHAN\)](#) to increase awareness among medical providers and local health jurisdictions and posted [information for healthcare providers](#) about case identification and case reporting to CDPH. Additionally, we developed a [Silica Hazard Alert for Workers, which we disseminated](#) in our monthly newsletter and via external partners. We are also working with state and local partners to make silicosis a reportable condition in California.



The Impact

OHB's work has stimulated action by others. In response to rising case numbers, Cal/OSHA re-initiated a [Special Emphasis Program](#) for the countertop fabrication industry and conducted outreach to over 800 employers, [sharing information](#) about regulations and OHB educational materials. The Western Occupational and Environmental Medical Association (WOEMA) successfully [petitioned](#) the California Occupational Safety and Health Standards Board for an emergency standard to control engineered stone silica exposures. Los Angeles County is conducting outreach to countertop fabrication workers, and the [LA County Board of Supervisors](#) voted to make June "Silicosis Awareness Month" and to investigate the feasibility of an engineered stone ban.

"It is of critical importance that we take all feasible measures to stop this new epidemic of occupational lung disease among California workers." – WOEMA

For more information: [CDPH Silica Safety Resources](#)